



# ELSAH HISTORY

Number Six

July-August 1973

## Elsah on the National Register

The work of getting Elsay placed on the National Register was spearheaded by Dr. Charles Hosmer, whose comments on this event follow:

\*\*\*\*\*

On the 8th of August, 1973, Congressman Paul Findley announced that the Village of Elsay had been included in the National Register of Historic Places by the Department of the Interior. Although the initial news of this event may sound like a simple declaration by a member of Congress, the nomination of Elsay marks the end of a long period of struggle and research for those involved in seeing the nomination to completion. In years to come the National Register designation may be very important to the preservation of Elsay and its surrounding bluffland.

The preparation of Elsay's application for the National Register began over seven years ago when Charles Hosmer and Paul Williams carried out a systematic survey of the Village as a whole. The initial result of the survey was Elsah: A Historic Guidebook, printed in 1967 and now in its third edition. The following year the same authors deposited with the Historic American Buildings Survey thirty-five inventory sheets on as many Elsay buildings. These cards included pictures of the buildings, a brief history of each one, and a diagram that showed the street location. Since 1969 either Williams or Hosmer has served on the Illinois Historic Sites Advisory Committee, where all National Register nominations for Illinois have to be screened. It soon became clear that there would be a substantial gain for Elsay if the whole town could be put on the Register, so interested individuals prepared an application that described Elsay's unique position among river towns. Mr. Cyrus A. Bunting helped prepare the survey boundary of Elsay on a map. The Illinois committee approved the nomination at its meeting in Chicago on March 16, 1973, and then passed

that form on to the National Park Service in Washington. In the final screening of the application it became clear that the boundaries of the Elsay district should be extended to include the surrounding hills, thus completing the picture that the village presents. The 352 acres in the Elsay district nearly coincide with the boundaries of the village as a political unit--thus making Elsay the first entire community to achieve some national recognition.

Now that the announcement of Elsay's listing fades into history it is legitimate to ask whether there is any real long-term meaning to a National Register Nomination. Indeed there is--and the benefits may be coming to light for many years. Under the provisions of the Historic Preservation Act of 1966, properties on the Register are eligible for matching grants from the National Trust and the Department of the Interior for preservation, survey, or restoration projects. The amount of money available for these grants has been steadily increasing, but at the present time it is inadequate for the number of requests for help that have been coming in from all over the nation. Elsay, through the Village Board and the Historic Elsay Foundation, will almost certainly prepare a project request in the next few years.

Whenever an agency of the federal government plans a project that may in any way threaten a site that is on the Register, it is possible that either the Department of the Interior or some other federal office will have to study the whole situation. In the case of the proposed levee across the Mississippi from Elsay, the United States Army Corps of Engineers must face the fact that their building plans could affect a site that is now listed with the federal government. Every two or three years the United States Government Printing Office will sell a book that covers the whole of the National Register, and so Elsay will be listed with a

ELSAH HISTORY, published quarterly in Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter issues by Historic Elsay Foundation, Paul O. Williams, editor. Subscription is with membership. Send to P. O. Box 117, Elsay, Illinois 62028. Rates: individual, \$2; family, \$3; sustaining, \$10 or more. Sample copies available on request.

number of other significant sites and districts in Illinois.

A great many people have contributed many hours of work that led to the preparation of Elsah's application for a listing. The fact that this unique river village has been dignified with such recognition does not mean that Elsah has been saved. It does not pledge the federal government to swoop in and turn the town into a Midwest museum. It does mean that in the future Elsah can expect help from a number of governmental agencies, and we have passed a significant milestone in proving that Elsah is indeed "historic" in several senses of the word. Much work remains to be done.

## HEF at the Tri-Centennial

As anyone who spent the summer in the Elsah area knows, this year marked the tri-centennial of the first known European exploration of the upper Mississippi Valley in an expedition headed by Father Jacques Marquette and his friend, the fur trader Louis Jolliet. Beginning at St. Ignace Mission in what is now upper Michigan on May 17, 1673, the voyageurs paddled down Lake Michigan, down Green Bay to the Fox River, up the Fox, portaging to the Wisconsin River and going down the Wisconsin to the Mississippi, entering that river on June 17th above the present site of Galena, Illinois. Then they descended the Mississippi, passing Elsah, noting the presence of the Piasa Bird petroglyphs, and continuing on down the great river to the mouth of the Arkansas River. They began their return voyage on July 17th, entering the Illinois River at the present site of Grafton on August 25th, and then paddling upriver to Lake Michigan, thence going northward again to Green Bay and ending the exploration at the St. Francis Xavier Mission near Green Bay at the end of September, 1673.

This year saw a re-enactment of the voyage by eight people in two canoes. Jolliet was represented by Reed Lewis, a French teacher, and Marquette by the Reverend Charles McNery. Dean Campbell was an interpreter, Leon Broske a guide, and Ken Lewis, Bill Dwyer, Jim Phillips, and Jeff LeClerc (a fourteen year old boy scout who represented an Indian) to fill out the group.

Alton's extensive welcome for the voyageurs extended both before and after their arrival on July 2nd. Of interest to Elsah historians was the inclusion of Frederick Oakes Sylvester paintings in an art show held in the Unitarian Church. Paul Williams of HEF presented a slide lecture on Sylvester twice during the weekend of June 30th to July 1st.

HEF also was included in the Rivertown Festival, as one of twenty organizations whose booths, constructed by the Alton Area Landmarks Association, and sponsored by local businesses, were reproductions of hundred-year-old businesses in Alton. Elsah, which

incidentally voted itself dry in 1894, was assigned the Golden Slipper Saloon booth, generously sponsored by Tony's Lounge of Alton. The booth sign advertised "Perty Girls All the Time," causing the male members of HEF to explain rather frequently to browsers that at the moment the girls were out to lunch. They ate a lot.

The HEF booth was manned from July 1st through the 4th by HEF members Bob Connell, Alma Barnes, Nancy and Paul Williams, Anne Williams, Pat Farmer, Edith Belote, and Helen and Leslie Yelland. Literature, memberships, and other items donated by members were sold, with a net sales of \$111.70. Considering the heat, the dust, a windstorm that nearly blew down the booths, a thunderstorm that did blow them down, and the many questions of the crowd, these members deserve many thanks.

The voyageurs arrived in Alton on July 2nd. After a stop off at the site of the newly repainted Piasa Bird at Norman's Landing, they beached their canoes just above the dam at Riverfront Park and immediately pitched their tent there. Then they sang songs for the crowd and chatted with Altonians in the area of the booths. HEF members were able to give literature to some of them and talk about the voyage. Although the day was hot and their schedule arduous, the re-enactors were a very genial group. They said that their welcome at Alton was the best they had yet encountered. Said Dean Campbell, who has been to Elsah, "It's a really nice town. I hope you can keep it that way."



HEF member Nancy Williams gives a copy of Elsah History to Reverend McNery at our riverfront booth while Jeff LeClerc watches.



## after the flood

Information in the *Alton Evening Telegraph* of July 20th, 1973 regarding this spring's flood is of sufficient importance to be commented on in this newsletter. The article in question pointed out that the actual volume of water being carried by the river per second was not nearly so great as has been the case in a number of large floods in the past, even though the crest was much higher. A table of figures compiled by the United States Geological Survey for St. Louis must really give us pause:

Flood Year	Volume	Depth at Crest
1844	1,300,000 cu. ft./sec.	41.32 ft.
1892	926,000	36.00
1903	1,019,000	38.00
1908	850,000	34.95
1909	860,000	35.25
1927	889,300	36.10
1973	849,000	42.23

These figures show that despite the fact that the 1973 superflood contained, at crest, only 849,000 cubic feet of water per second, it nevertheless topped the crest of the 1844 flood, which had 451,000 more cubic feet of water passing per second. It also shows that the flood of 1908, which was just slightly larger in water volume than this year's, had a crest of 7.28 feet lower. This means that had the river conditions of 1908 been present this year, not a single house in Elsay would have been flooded, not even Earl's Cottage, which might have been temporarily surrounded with water at basement level. It means that access to the River Road would never have been cut off, or if so only for a day or two. It means that the extreme disruption of the village, which was multiplied many times, of course, in Grafton, Alton, and other river-side communities, would never have occurred.

The difference, of course, has been man's tampering with the river by constructing wing dams, levees, dams, and the River Road itself. The water had to go somewhere, and the only place it could go was up.

Currently there is, as most readers of this newsletter know, a controversial proposal to construct the L-15 levee on Missouri Point, across the river from us, stretching from St. Charles around the junction of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers and up the Missouri bank to Portage des Sioux. Since this is not a political periodical, we do not want to amass here the volume of evidence against this proposal, but merely to present one set of facts based on the estimates of the United States Army Corps of Engineers, which is proposing the levee, and the situation in Elsay.

The Corps says that the proposed levee will raise the river level by only six-tenths of a foot. Accepting this figure as accurate, we feel that it will make a great deal of difference for Elsay. For instance, had the flood of this spring, which the figures above show has been well exceeded in volume, been another six-

tenths of a foot higher, it would have covered the first floor of the Darrs' house. The same would have been true for the Crisswells' house. The water which crossed Mill Street by the Methodist Recreation Hall would have spread down the street at least to the post office. It may have entered the Holts' house on lower Mill Street and covered that area of Mill entirely, cutting off the front entrances of the Felch and Gent houses. A mere six-tenths of a foot spreads a long way during a flood. This is not to mention, of course, the additional damage to the Gate Lodge, Earl's Cottage, the Riverview House, the Greer house, the Mandorca house and the Connell house by an additional six-tenths of a foot of water.

Long established communities like Elsay, built above flood stage, can fall victim to the designs of others who keep the river back from areas it formerly naturally had access to during high water periods. With Askew Creek flowing through the town, we cannot have a levee of our own. The fact that the flood of 1844 contained half again as much water as this year's must give us pause. Continuation of the levee race may end up giving us the most historic submarine community in the Mississippi Valley and encourage a movement to change the name of the village to Atlantis.

## House Tour

This year's house tour, originally scheduled for Mother's Day, was postponed until Father's Day, June 17th, because of the flood. It proved to be an excellent day and a very successful tour. Historic Elsay Foundation is extremely grateful for all the willing workers who put so much into the tour--too many people to name here--and for the many patrons who came to visit the houses. Over and over again we heard from the workers how much they enjoyed the fine people who visited Elsay that day.

Open on the tour this year were Mrs. Trovillion's Doll Museum; the newly restored Village Inn of the Bradleys; the Bates-Mack House, even then in its final stages of restoration; the perennially beautiful Hansell-Copeland House; Mrs. Frances Grayson's charmingly furnished brick home on Palm Street; the Village Hall, which served as a headquarters; Bob Connell's house, newly risen above the floods; both of Elsay's churches, the Christian Science church and the historic Elsay Methodist Church; the Huss-Anderson House, which Mrs. Virginia Anderson rescued from oblivion; and the Barnes-Clark House, very interestingly furnished by Mr. and Mrs. John Clark. The Village of Elsay Civic Center (the old Elsay School) was open as a craft and bake sale center headed by Mrs. Pat Farmer. A slide show of old Elsay pictures also was shown repeatedly during the afternoon in the lower room.

The day was fine, though a little warm. The visitors seemed to be enjoying themselves, and many complimented the HEF workers on the tour. We heard very few complaints.

A total of \$1,556 in tickets were sold. Sale of publications brought in \$109.40. The art sale in the Village Hall grossed \$232.00, and a private art sale there brought in a gross of \$89.50. The bake sale totalled \$58.80 and the craft sale \$76.70. Thus the gross receipts of the tour were \$2,122.40. From this amount there were \$428.58 in expenses. This amount included expenses for the art totalling \$181.35; the cost of plastic runners for the houses, \$26.46; the cost of the tour guide books, \$150; publication supplies, \$25.60; tickets, \$23.10; name badges, \$2.49; grass mowing, \$2.00; and other supplies, \$17.58. Thus the net profit of the tour was \$1,693.82. This amount will come in very handy this fall when restoration work begins on the Village Hall.

For countless hours of planning and administration, special thanks must go to Inge Mack and Bob Connell. The generosity of those who opened their houses is deeply appreciated, as are the efforts of all who made the tour a success.

Next year it is anticipated that the tour will return to its traditional date of Mother's Day. We are looking forward to some new innovations and another fine day. Any suggestions about the tour would be much appreciated.

## news notes

We anticipate that restoration work will begin on the Elsah Village Hall this fall. It is planned that the work will be done by Mr. Tom Perotka, who has done so much restoration work in the village lately.

### The Koster Dig

The Koster Expedition at Eldred has completed another successful year despite the great difficulties and hardships brought about by the flooding of Kampsville this spring, including all the lab and living facilities of the expedition. Work in the field was delayed only three days, though, of course, rehabilitation of the facilities took much longer.

On August 2nd, 1973, Senator Adlai Stevenson entered information about the Koster Expedition into the Congressional Record (See S 15454-56). The bulk of this report is an article by Felicia A. Holton that appeared in the New York Times for July 15th.

Governor Walker visited the dig site on August 25th.

### Contribution

HEF is grateful for a contribution of \$25 from Mr. and Mrs. James E. Kussman, and also for many other contributions, large and small.

### Iliniwek Magazine

This summer we had the pleasure of meeting Dick Phillips, owner and editor of Iliniwek Magazine. This small bi-monthly deals entirely with Illinois history. The May-June issue of Iliniwek (Vol. 11, No. 3) deals entirely with the frontier iron industry in Illinois. It is original, unexplored material and fascinating. Anyone wishing to subscribe may do so by sending \$4.75 per year to Iliniwek, P. O. Box 2312, East Peoria, IL. 61611. This project is worthy of support.

### Stores in Elsah!

On August 31st the Darrs opened the Elsah Country Store in the Singletary-Lazenby Building on lower LaSalle Street. Their stock includes country crafts, paintings, candy, eggs, milk, home baked goods on weekends, soda, and other items. They will be open from noon to 6 p.m. daily except Thursday. This is the first such store in Elsah since the closing of the Keller Store three years ago.

By the time this issue is printed another store, selling jeans and tops will open next door to the Country Store. Welcome to both.



DON'T FORGET. CONTRIBUTIONS TO HISTORIC ELSAH FOUNDATION ARE TAX DEDUCTIBLE NOW.